

Reyna Lidgi

Reyna Lidgi Sofia

Bulgaria

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Reyna kept on constantly taking out things from somewhere. 'This here is my father's elegant working bag, look at his camera, and these here are the newspapers from the beginning of the century, these are his trousers – look at the label. Now I am wearing them.'

From a number of notebooks–diaries fall out Reyna's collections from her childhood – cuttings of fairytale illustrations and pieces of tin-foil paper. Here are some boxes full of postcards – letters from that time and heaps of pictures, pictures, pictures...It was swarming with pictures everywhere. We are talking while sitting at an old solid carved table with four stable chairs around. I had the feeling that Reyna's mother was still there. She had just gone out for a while and Reyna was taking advantage of the situation to mess up the place a little because she feels the order imposed on her as a burden. Otherwise in telling her story Reyna is amazingly precise, logical. She has a phenomenal memory for dates, quotes them in succession, she is always ready to be of help. For me Reyna is an example of the perfect worker and the fact that she went on working at the same place well after the age limit for retirement is not accidental. Even when she quit at her own will, they still wanted to retain her!

My name is Reyna Buko Lidgi. I was born in Sofia on 16th March 1929. I am a Russian Philology graduate and I have worked as an interpreter and a teacher. I don't have brothers and sisters and I have never been married. My mother tongue is Bulgarian but I also speak Ladino, Russian, Spanish, Italian, Polish, French.

My ancestors may have come from the town of Leon in Spain, but I am not sure [1](#) [2](#). I have made this assumption according to some pieces of information from the Yearbook of the Jewish Organization. ['Yearbook of the Jewish Cultural-Educational Organization'. The first issue of the Yearbook was published in 1966. On its pages appear materials devoted to the past of the Bulgarian Jews, scientific announcements about the history of the Balkan Jews, about their customs, way of living and culture. There also appear articles on historical, linguistic, ethnographic, demographic and cultural topics. They are a serious contribution to the present and the past of the Bulgarian Jews.] They are Ladino [3](#) [Sephardi] Jews. I don't have any information about my great-grandmothers and grandfathers. My memories begin with my grandmothers and grandfathers – the parents of my parents.

My parental grandfather's name is Aaron Lidgi. I don't have information about when he was born. I don't know him because he died in 1929 in Bregovo village (Vidin region). My appearance has been planned after his death as a continuation of the family. He used to be a middleman of wheat and grain crops. His mother tongue was Ladino. I have no information about how religious he was. He had three sisters but I don't know them and I don't have any information about them.

My mother has told me that he used to be a very soft chap who loved her very much. It seems that their financial situation was very good, judging by the fact that they had the means to send my father to study in Vienna and Switzerland and by the golden jewels, which the family gave to their daughter-in-law, my mother. I have seen and I know that there existed a golden ring with a diamond, a golden watch and a golden wristwatch, two tiepins, as well as golden earrings, a golden shedai. I don't know where they are as they disappeared as time passed. [Reyna is afraid to state that they still exist.] My paternal grandmother, Reyna Lidgi (nee Kohen) was born in 1868 in Vidin. She died in 1937 in Sofia. With my grandfather Aaron they had two children – my father Buko and his sister Rashel Lidgi (Pinkas by marriage). The family used to live in a house with a garden in Bregovo village (it was sold much later). I can't say when exactly the move took place. I can't say why but her daughter Rashel also moved to Sofia. Granny Reyna lived with us in our house for some time (in Pavlovo quarter at the time). [A special report of the Ministry of Finance connected to the repeal of the anti-Jew laws (1945) shows that 300 Jews owned plots and houses on the territory of Sofia Municipality – in Knyazhevo, Pavlovo, Dragalevtsi, Boyana, Moderno Predgradie. There is no information about the other details.] I remember granny Reyna. She didn't know Bulgarian and spoke to me in Ladino. I owe my initial knowledge of this language to her as my mother and father spoke mainly in Bulgarian. They used Ladino only when they had to share something secret so that the others would not understand them.

My grandmother was a plump woman; she wasn't pretty. I remember her with her knitting work in hand. She used to be strict, domineering, always pressing her views, she required corresponding attitude and my mother, who was very shy, always conformed with her, was even afraid of her. This was partly due to the fact that my granny Reyna didn't like my mother because she didn't have dowry. My mother had told me that when she went to live in my father's house in the town of Vidin, before my birth, granny Reyna wanted her to do the cooking in the house but my mother couldn't cook and she was shaking with fear so much that when she was told to prepare her first rice granny kept quiet and didn't give her a hand in order to see what her daughter-in-law was capable of. My mother then asked my father what to do and he said, 'Well, put in rice, pour in water' and the result was something repulsive. But my father thought highly of my mother's prestige and when she served the rice, he said, 'It's very tasty! It's very tasty!' Granny was looking on that scene and said, 'Why! I prepare dishes for you which are twice as better and you don't like them and now you say you like this'. This makes me think that she was a domineering woman. After some time my mother tried to prepare French beans but out of fear that something would go wrong, she dropped the pot with the dish inside and soiled some mat in front of the cooker. She ran into her room and was hiding there until my father came back from work. Those were difficult months as a whole.

My mother's father, Isak Moshe Beniesh, was born in 1863 in the town of Ruse and died in 1939. His mother tongue was Ladino. He was from a rich family, which was known in Ruse as the family of the Benishimi, who used to have sugar factories in the town. They were five children (altogether three brothers – Samuel, Mois and Isak and two sisters – Tihana and Timazal). I can't say anything else about them. My grandfather was the youngest. To a certain extent my grandfather was a failure and he couldn't find his place in life. He was poor – his brothers didn't include him in their business. I couldn't say what the reasons for their decision were. He used to be a commission merchant – he would offer goods to different companies and delivered them afterwards, but he didn't profit very much from this activity. He used to be very religious – attended the services in

the synagogue and afterwards would wake the whole family up for the Morning Prayer. Due to religious motives, as well as to his love for traveling, he decided to leave for Palestine [at that time] and to become a Hadji. [Hadj for the Muslims and Hadjiistvo for the Christians are connected to a pilgrimage to the sacred places. For the Muslims the sacred place is Mecca whereas for the Christians it is Jerusalem. There is no data about Hadji in Judaism.] Shortly before that, he had got engaged to his first wife, Sarah (nee Eroham). While he was in Palestine the rumor had it that she was very sickly, which was something terrible at the time but nonetheless, after returning from his pilgrimage, he married her in 1901. My mother was born in 1902, in 1907 in the town of Ferdinand and my uncle Mois Beniesh was born (he died in 1976) and in 1910 in the town of Sliven my other uncle Nisim Beniesh was born (he died in 1948). His children were born in different towns because grandpa used to travel a lot. On the one hand, he loved traveling and, on the other, it was connected to his job. Additionally, the frequent change of the place of living was indispensable because of their necessity to find a cheaper way of living, as grandpa didn't earn much.

In 1918 his first wife Sarah (nee Eroham) Beniesh, (by marriage) died from Spanish influenza [At the time of the First Balkan War in 1913 and World War I in 1914 on the front lines and in the regions of the military operations there were several outbreaks of certain diseases that took the lives of many soldiers and civilians. The diseases were cholera, typhus and plague and they were mentioned in the official statements of all the countries involved in the war. Probably Spanish influenza was also an epidemic disease.] in Ruse. I don't know what the symptoms of this disease were, I know that it was a real pandemic at the time, which did all kind of harm and took more victims than the victims of World War I. My mother also caught Spanish influenza, together with grandma, but she managed to survive whereas grandma died because of her weak heart. Exactly forty days after the death of grandma Sarah, grandpa got married for the second time - to Dzhamila. He met her in Ruse where she was born in 1880 (there is no information about the time of her death). After the wedding, in 1919 the whole family, for I don't know what reasons, settled down in Sofia.

My maternal grandmother's name was Sarah Beniesh (nee Eroham). She was born in Ruse in 1880 and died in Ruse in 1918. She had three brothers - Solomon, Eroham and David and three sisters - Duda, Sulcha and Esther. (I have absolutely no information about these brothers and sisters. When I visited Israel in 1960 I met with Esther only, who was living in a home for elderly people, and I found out that she had not been married and didn't have children while all the other brothers and sisters had children.)

Grandma Sarah spoke Ladino, she was religious and she was an unbelievably good housewife. From her my mother inherited and mastered her sense of order. Nonetheless, granny Sarah didn't allow my mother to spend too much time in the kitchen because granny wanted her to study. That is the reason why mother couldn't cook when she was very young.

A relic has remained from granny Sarah - a dress that is called bindali. My mother used to protect it like something sacred during all our journeys. When I was a child she didn't allow me to even touch it. It was bought in Turkey and was part of the dowry of the Jewish girls. It was wine-red in color - silk velvet with ornaments embroidered with a silver thread. It was being worn during different celebrations - engagements, births, weddings but it is not a wedding dress and it wasn't granny Sarah's wedding dress. I decided to put it on at a holiday organized by OJB 'Shalom' [4](#) and then it became the emblem of the organization.

The second wife of my grandfather, Dzhamila, got married for the first time to my grandfather when she was 38. At that time my mother was 16, Mois was 11 and Miko (Nisim) was 8. Dzhamila couldn't conceive in the first two years of the marriage and looked after her three stepchildren very well. Afterwards she gave birth to three more children – Sarika, Clara and Solomon. (I don't have reliable information as to the years of their births. I only know that Sarah – Sarika - was born in 1920.) The appearance of her own children changed Dzhamila's attitude towards her stepchildren. From her stepchildren she loved Mois the most. His brothers and sisters from the second marriage also loved him very much and long after they grew up and left for Israel they went on calling him uncle Mois. My mother was the one who felt worst of all in the family.

There had always been some tension in the relationship between her and Dzhamila. On the one hand, it appeared because grandpa married her too soon, only forty days after granny Sarah died and, on the other hand, grandpa made my mother give the jewels, which were left to her by her mother Sarah, to Dzhamila. Eventually, she gave them, but this gave an edge to the relationship between her and her father Isak. (The third reason was that Dzhamila used to be a beautiful, domineering woman, very religious. She had special requirements for the food and even later, when she visited us she didn't have anything to eat because she had doubts as to whether the food had been prepared according to all religious requirements. She had imposed the same order in the family that was new to her. At that time the family was already living in Sofia. I don't know any details about their life but my mother told me that the family had a difficult existence because grandpa didn't earn very much and it was difficult to provide for the six children. The poor way of living and the strained relations were a torture for my mother and she used to feel very depressed at home. That's why she didn't call her stepmother 'mum' for a long time. Not until much later, during one of our visits to Israel in 1960, when Dzhamila was already living in a kibbutz, did my mother call her 'mum' and granny Dzhamila, deeply moved, allowed herself a bite of the cake, which my mother had prepared and afterwards expressed satisfaction that she had prepared it 'very cleanly'. Only then did their relation get warmer.

My mother, Elvira Isak Lidgi (nee Beniesh) was born in Vidin on 18th July 1902 and died in 1990 in Sofia. She used to like Mathematics very much. She finished her secondary education in the Second Girls' High School in Vidin and later, when she was already married, attended a free university in Sofia but she didn't finish her studies at the insistence of her husband. I can't say what his motives for that were. She used to go to the synagogue regularly and she kept the rituals. She was a beauty, too, with a very stately figure, but she was extremely depressed after her mother's death and was very devoted to her two brothers, and most of all to Mois Beniesh.

Mois Beniesh, who in 1939 finished his secondary education in a Trade High School, started work as a bookkeeper in the hosiery factory 'Rufo'. He married Rebeka in 1935 and had a daughter – Maya Beniesh [An editor in the Theater Department of 'Hristo Botev' Program of the Bulgarian National Radio]. My uncle played an active role in the communist movement. In 1946 he left for Moscow as a spokesman for Georgi Dimitrov [5](#) and there he enrolled at GITIZ (State Theater Institute) – drama directing. He returned to Bulgaria and became a director at 'Ivan Vazov' National Theater. [Mois Isak Beniesh was born on 29th May 1907 in Ruse. He died on 6th May 1976 in Sofia. He initially studied at the Drama School at the National Theater and until 1951 - at the State Theater Institute in Moscow in the class of Y. Zavadski. He worked as a drama director at the National Theater from 1951 until 1976. He was teaching at VITIZ (The Institute for Drama Arts in Bulgaria) from 1952 until

1976. A professor in Drama Directing since 1969. A characteristic feature of his work is the combination between a width of social generalizing and a deep analysis of the spiritual life of the characters. He stages works by Stephan Kostov, Arbuzov, Arthur Miller, A. Hakett, J. Priestley, B. Brecht, Gibson.]

The youngest brother – Nisim (Miko) - had very well developed technical skills. I don't know what education he got but in 1947 he was awarded the Gold Medal of Labor for his appliances for the sewing machine through which different operations for the production of overlogue could be performed, so he was one of the first bearers of this medal. He married Milka Beniesh in 1928 and they had four children – Sarah, Isak, Yakim and Mony. Uncle Miko died in 1948.

I have scarce information concerning my mother's brothers and sisters from the second marriage of grandpa. Sarika studied at a vocational school in Sofia and acquired the specialty seamstress. I can't say anything about Clara's education. Solomon got some sort of technical education, I can't say what exactly. Later my uncle Mois helped him to get a job as a technician in the hosiery factory 'Rufo', in which he, too, had worked.

In January 1941 the three children Sarah, Clara and Solomon left for Palestine by ship. Dzhamila, their mother, remained in Bulgaria, but left later, I can't say when exactly. On board Sarah met Levy Meyuhas – a Romanian Jew. After spending some time in a camp on the island of Cyprus, [The ships which had Jews on board during World War II on course to Palestine sailed under the flags of different countries. In December 1940 from Varna to Palestine started the ship Salvator, which sank after a shipwreck not far from Istanbul. The Jews, Bulgarian subjects, who were about 180, were returned to Bulgaria at the beginning of 1941 whereas the alien subjects were probably taken to Cyprus from where they were gradually sent to Palestine.] they – Sarah, Levy, Clara, Solomon – left for Palestine. Sarah and Levy got married and they bought a house. Later on they had five children – Itshak, Elly, Mony, Beni, Veri. In order to provide for them they went to live in a kibbutz for some time. When the children had almost grown up, the family went back to live in their old house. Clara lived in a kibbutz as well. Her mother, Dzhamila, went to live with her. The other sister Clara married Juda Braha and had five children, but I can't say what their names were. The brother Solomon lived in Palestine, too, and died in 1948 in the first war there. I can't remember his wife's name but I know that he had two children – Itshak and Haviva. I have a picture of the children with granny Dzhamila.

My father, Buko Aaron Lidgi, was born on 29th March 1892 in Vidin and died on 19th February 1941 in Sofia. He acquired education that was considered high at that time. He attended a Trade School of Higher Education in Vienna. While abroad he caught tuberculosis of the bone joint and his parents sent him to Switzerland to undergo medical treatment. He spoke German, Romanian, Ladino and Bulgarian. His life in central Europe had put a mark on the formation of his views as well as on his appearance. The western-European education built in him a broad-minded view of the world in which the focus was on the values common for whole Europe and not on the religiousness and the strict keeping of traditions and religious requirements. At his insistence I enrolled at a Bulgarian school of general education, not at a Jewish school. There appeared certain tension in his relation with his sister Rashel because of the money their parents spent on his education and medical treatment. Aunt Rashel didn't acquire any education. In spite of the fact that he had a slight limp and wore a little walking stick due to his illness, he was a handsome man – an eligible match for many girls. Later, I can't say when exactly, aunt Rashel married her husband – Haim

Pankas – and had two daughters, Sarah and Reyna. In the 1950s her family left for Israel.

My mother told me that in order to get separated from the heavy atmosphere in the family in the 1920s, she went to visit a distant relative from grandpa Itzhak's kin, whose name was Tiyasumha. She lived in Vidin. In the house next door lived my father's family. At that time he was in Switzerland but had come back to ask permission from his parents to propose to a Swiss girl. He saw my mother and some emotions arose in him. He felt attracted by her modesty, by her unostentatious presence. He went back to Switzerland but his desire to marry the Swiss girl had faded. He started writing letters to my mother all the time but she didn't respond because, at the beginning, she had a friendship with a Bulgarian man. His name was Stephan. At a certain moment there occurred some cooling in the relationship caused by the boy – a Bulgarian and only then did my mother write to my father that she was ready to accept his proposal. My father had proposed on several occasions in his letters but she rejected him, he even had a very valuable ring, which he wanted to give her. My mother didn't accept it because she was very proud and considered this as a kind of commitment. This ring used to be something really remarkable, but unfortunately it was stolen from him in Romania. So they got engaged regardless of her difficult financial situation. She didn't even have a dowry – ashougar. They managed to get engaged – the engagement took place on 3rd September 1923.

My father came to ask my mother's hand from grandfather Isak in their house in Sofia exactly when the September Rebellion started. ⁶ And the two of them spent the night by the window because at that time there was unrest in Sofia. In fact, my father spent the night in the home of the Beniesh family. This is a story that my mother has told and I can't give any more details, nor do I remember whether my mother has ever told me more about the September Rebellion. (The date fixed for the wedding was 1st June 1924. So, these nine months were a period of cooing, obviously. My father used to work in Vidin. And then began the agony of preparing the dowry – ashougar. I don't know what exactly the dowry used to be and what it had to consist of.) [Ashougar or the dowry of the Jewish girl consists of: six sets of bed sheets and pillow-cases, decorated with hand-made embroidery, a special chemise for the first matrimonial night, garment, secular, and for keeping Sabbath as well, bought by the bride's parents. The well-to-do families used to buy a bindali dress, which Reyna has mentioned; there was also the so-called 'djura' – a counterpane whose knitting patterns were given from mother to daughter and the very start of the knitting was to be performed in secret by an owner of an already made 'djura', a counterpane for a woman in child-birth.] Aunt Sulcha – granny Sarah's older sister used to be very rich and she had promised to send out the dowry for Elvira. And there comes a big parcel, they open it and what do they see – old underwear, old chemises. This is the way a rich aunt treats her poor niece. My mother, as I have already told you, was very proud. She hires a seamstress, they repair everything, put the things in a parcel and send it back to aunt Sulcha with a letter, which says 'You have another daughter, you may need this.' But after all, there were some things left from granny Sarah. [The dowry was an important thing at that time as the tradition was to spread it on the fence so that everybody could see that the daughter-in-law was wealthy. My mother pulled her weight together and prepared her dowry alone. I still keep some parts of her dowry – a counterpane decorated with typical Bulgarian embroidery, garnish for a woman in child-birth – a silk cloth with hand-made embroidery, the bindali dress... probably there were more things but I don't know what happened to them. So my mother exhibited some dowry. My father, on the other hand, gave 1, 500 leva to grandfather Isak, so that he could give them as a dowry to his daughter.

They married in 1924 in Vidin. According to a story my mother told she didn't have her own wedding dress. They borrowed it from Auntie Lizi, wife of a cousin of my father. His name was Izidor Lidgi. At the moment when some photographs of the bride and the kin were being taken, my father's sister Rashel, accidentally or on purpose – I don't know – stepped on the veil and it was torn. They found another veil but my mother's white stocking ran a ladder, then somebody spilled something on the bride's dress and it had to be washed quickly. So, my mother set off for the synagogue in Vidin with a ladder on her stocking and a wet dress. The procession was followed by music performers. After the wedding, the family spent some time living with granny Reyna in Vidin but due to the tension, which arose between mother and daughter-in-law, my father decided to leave for Sofia with his wife in 1925.

I remember Sofia from 1935-1936. It was a small, relatively clean town. I have most vivid memories of Dondukov Street, where now is the Sheraton hotel and TZUM [Sofia's Central Trade Center] – the so-called Largo [the St. Nikola Passage was situated there]. [The Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman yoke in 1878 took place when Sofia was in an extremely miserable state as a town, as an object for communication and esthetics. The population amounted to approximately 20, 000 people, who used to live in about ten quarters with narrow, dusty and muddy streets. One of the first tasks of Sofia Municipality was to give start of the building of a new Sofia. For this purpose famous foreign architects like Kollar, Grunanger, Mayerber, Schwanberg, Yovanovich were invited. For a short period of time they built the beautiful buildings of the Synagogue, the Parliament, the Military Club, the Phoenix Insurance Company and so on. Some Bulgarian architects like Lazarov, Nachev, Fingov, Nichev, Yurukov, Marichkov, Torniov, Milanov, Koychev and others, also contributed to the construction of the new face of Sofia. Dondukov Street is situated in the central part of Sofia, the so-called Largo. The buildings in that part of the city were designed in the so-called Wagner-style (Secession). Some Renaissance elements were included in them too. In the monumental buildings, the architects had made an attempt to include details from the old architectural tradition; they achieved colourful effects, typical of the Byzantine-Bulgarian architecture from the Middle Ages. The old churches in Nessebar served as models. An example in this respect is the building of the Central Public Baths.] It was a nice, paved street, there was a tram moving on it. There were confectionaries; Tachev Cinema was there. In the bookstore 'Chipev', in that same street, my father would often drop in to buy his favorite pens, which he used to collect. Opposite the bookstore was the butcher's 'Dokuzanov' where they sold fresh sausages, still hot, steaming... The ham was very tasty. I was often sent to do the shopping at St. Nikola market place [now TZUM], which was situated between the Central Public Baths and Dondukov street.

I was born in an apartment house, which was situated on the corner of the streets 'Tzar Simeon' and 'Tetevenska', now 'Budapeshta'. Afterwards my family moved house to Pavlovo quarter because at the age of five I got dysentery. My father decided to rent a little house in Pavlovo and to live there until my recovery. There came my granny Reyna in 1935 when she decided to move to Sofia. During that period – 1935-1936 – the rest of grandpa Isak's family (my mother's father and Dzhamila) lived in Sofia as well. I remember they lived on the corner of 'Bratya Miladinovi' and 'Makriopolska' and afterwards in 'Opalchenska' street, but my memories are fading.

And after Pavlovo, we lived on 51 'Bratya Miladinovi' street, afterwards on 41 'Pop Bogomil' and finally, before the internment [7](#), on 2 'Makriopolska'. My father liked us to change our premises

because he was educated in Europe, and in Europe people used to move house more frequently than in Bulgaria and they preferred to live in lodgings.

I remember our place on 51 'Bratya Miladinovi' and 'Makriopolska'. We rented the place until 1937-1938. It was a three-storey apartment house, which still exists. Our two-room apartment was on the third floor; the owners lived on the second floor. Our neighbors were Bulgarian and we were on best terms with them. There weren't any other Jewish families in the apartment house but opposite us, in 'Bratya Miladinovi' street too, lived the Primo family who we were friends with. We rented two rooms and a kitchen but, as we weren't in a blooming financial situation, we had a tenant in one of the rooms. My father, mother and I used to sleep in the other room. The toilet was in the apartment and, since my mother was very house-proud, she kept it immaculate. My father also cared a lot about the toilet. He, as a person educated in Europe, used to say that in Switzerland and Vienna whenever you want to rent a place, you first go into the toilet. My mother had also cut some pictures, art reproductions from the magazine I used to receive then – 'Kartinna Galeria' ['Picture Gallery'] ['Kartinna Galeria' – a Bulgarian monthly illustrated magazine. On print in Sofia between 1905 and 1925. Editor-in-chief – G. Palashev. In 1920 its name was changed to 'Kartinna Galeria za Mladezhi' ('Picture Gallery for Young People'). As an appendix to the magazine there was a special file with color reproductions of pictures by Bulgarian and foreign artists. The magazine played a significant role in the artistic cultivation of generations of Bulgarians.] – and had put them in the toilet for decoration.

Our next home was on the corner of 41 'Pop Bogomil' street and 'Maria Luiza' boulevard, rented again. The apartment was on the fourth floor. The whole burden in moving the house fell on my mother because my father had undergone a leg operation. She was very devoted to our belongings, and very tidy and meticulous on top of that. When we had to move every single object was carefully wrapped. Just imagine what it meant to move from one place to another. And she had difficulties to part with her belongings.

On 'Bogomil' we lived only for a while because at that time my father had problems with the heart and couldn't climb the stairs to the fourth floor and, despite the nuisance of moving, we had to change our home again. The new one was on 2 'Makriopolska' – our last home before the internment during the Holocaust. We lived on the second floor and we had a tenant again. Our tenants were usually boys from Vidin who studied in Sofia. The apartment was furnished modestly. We used to have a massive stable wardrobe. When we were moving house once the porters couldn't take it down the stairs. They had to tie it with ropes and to suspend it from the window. The rope broke but the wardrobe fell on its legs and was absolutely unharmed.

In the room we had a big extending table, which we sold during the internment and we slept in beds with paintings on the boards. In the kitchen we had a sofa, a cupboard and a table with several stools. On 'Bratya Miladinovi' we had a built-in fireplace, something like a tile stove on firewood. The wood was provided at the right time and there came some people to cut them in pieces. On 'Makriopolska' I remember that we already used coal, which means that we were using the Pernik-type stove, which I still keep, for heating.

At home we used to have a lot of books – my father's were in German and Bulgarian and I used to have my children's books and magazines. Additionally, my father liked reading newspapers very much. I remember the caricatures in the 'Papagal' [Parrot] newspaper. They used to buy a lot of

other newspapers like 'Zora' [Dawn] [8](#), 'Utro' [Morning] [9](#) and one of the reasons were the crosswords – my father's favorite pastime. My mother was reading a lot and she used to be his constant consultant in this pastime of his. We had also stored some communist books belonging to uncle Mois, in order to keep them hidden. And here I can tell you an interesting story. The action takes place in the 1940s. At that time the so-called [police] blockades were taking place looking for politically unreliable individuals and evidence against them. Then my father wasn't going to work and I was very happy because we were taking walks around our house to find some confectionery. He would buy me a chocolate bar and in these bars there were pictures that we would stick to a poster with the dream of getting a bicycle if we succeeded in covering the whole poster with pictures, without realizing, without understanding that daddy remained home because of that blockade. We were trembling with fear that if the police came home, they would find uncle Mois's communist books. That is why we had carefully hidden them behind my children's books but mum was using another excuse too. As my father was ill, whenever there was a knock at the door, she made him lie on the bed and said, 'My husband is ill, this is a children's bookcase' and somehow they showed understanding and would leave us alone.

Our homes were always furnished modestly and it wasn't necessary to put great efforts into keeping them neat and tidy. My mother used to do that as well as the cooking. From her I learned a recipe for leek croquettes. [In Ladino these croquettes are known as 'Friticas di Pras'] Here is the recipe: you chop and boil two onions and six sticks of leek. You squeeze them well to get rid of the water. You grind them with a meat-mincing machine together with a boiled potato. You add two eggs and 300-400 grams of minced meat, but you can prepare them without meat if you wish. You form croquettes, roll them in flour and fry them, but as my mother had colitis, we would bake them in an oiled baking dish and on every croquette we would drip a few drops of oil. A washerwoman called Evtima used to come once a week. She used to always eat with us at the table. This was at the insistence of my father who was a democrat in his convictions.

When I was two months old there were nannies to look after me because mum was working as an insurance agent at Asicurazione Generale. ['Asicurazione Generale': a joint-stock company. The headquarters of the company were in Trieste, Italy. In 1927 the company opened a branch in Bulgaria. The company offered services in the sphere of life and property insurances. It existed until 1944.] I can't remember where it was situated. The deepest traces in my memories were left by granny Natalia – a Russian. She was of noble origin. Her husband had been a general killed by the bolsheviks [10](#). She fled the country with her three daughters by sea and all the jewels were sewn in a doll. When disembarking from the ship, the doll fell into the sea. After that she was living in poverty and she was forced to almost gather potato peels in order to provide for her daughters. She accepted to become a nanny in our family. She looked after me for three or four years as if I were her own child. I loved her very much. She didn't use Russian with me; she used to speak to me in Bulgarian with strong Russian accent.

My mother played the most fundamental role in my upbringing and my life, my father used to go to work. And he died very early, when I was only eleven years old. My mother worked at the beginning, because she was educated – she had a college education. She started work as an insurance agent in an insurance company, but when I caught dysentery at a very early age she was forced to quit and remain at home to look after me.

Mum was strict, but very good at the same time, of course, and if I tried to show any stubbornness, she succeeded in suppressing those manifestations, so I grew up under her wing. Her star sign was Leo and I am a Piscean, maybe this is significant in some way, I don't know... On remaining at home she started dealing with the housework with great diligence, she was imposing an order, which was even a bit of a burden. (My father, who worked as a bookkeeper, was compelled to take on more work from other companies. His last workplace was the 'Fayon' tannery, which was situated on the corner of the streets 'Maria Luiza' and 'Tzar Simeon'.)

My father's tastes and attitude were European. He liked the nice, beautiful things. He was a collector of expensive pens, he was always dressed smartly, and the colors of his clothes were always combined with a lot of taste. He was trying to cultivate this in me as well. He was aware that I had a favorite shirt, a favorite tie, but would always say 'Reny, what should I wear?' And I would say 'The blue shirt and the suit.' He insisted on mum's elegance, too. Mum was always with a hat, with the high-heeled shoes. A seamstress was coming to our place, to sew clothes. My father would choose the fibres, he would choose the designs, and they were joking that she wouldn't go to the toilet without his approval.

We always gathered around the table at dinner. I can't say that we were a particularly cheerful family, but we were united. After dinner mum and dad would start dealing with the ledgers. This was my father's additional job – to assist different companies with their bookkeeping and my mother used to help him finish his extra-work faster.

My father was a soft and yielding chap. My mother thought he was spoiling me. When Sunday came, he took walks with me. We started from the place we lived in, continued on 'Maria Luiza' until we reached the Palace. [The Palace of the Tzar in Bulgaria is situated in the center of Sofia, on Tzar Osvoboditel Boulevard. The Palace belongs to the state and it was built in the place of the old Turkish konak (police office). The reconstruction of the konak in 1878 was completed by the Austrian architect Rumpelmayer and its expansion and the application of the final touches in 1894 were done by architect Grunanger.] [11](#) There used to be a Viennese confectionary nearby and I would buy something sweet in that sweet shop and we headed home afterwards. My mother always made remarks to him that he was indulging me too much and that he shouldn't satisfy my every wish. When I went out with mum she succeeded with her tactfulness, 'Mum, buy me this...' 'There is something better down the street!', 'Mum, buy me that...', 'There is better down the street!' and we reached home on relatively, you know, good terms. Yes, my mother was a strong-willed woman, with a very enduring spirit, with a desire to overcome the obstacles on the road that we had to follow and I am inclined to say that we managed to tackle with the difficult situation during the Holocaust thanks to her and thanks to her we succeeded in moving ahead.

Every Saturday or Sunday our family made outings three or four kilometers from Sofia, in Knyazhevo, for example. If my mother had some house chores to complete, she remained at home and I went out only with my father. He was an amateur photographer and during those outings he was taking a lot of photos. He was an admirer of nature and that is why the focus in them is on nature, not on man.

On Saturday evening we went to eat kebapcheta [grilled oblong rissoles]. On Sunday my father would take me to the children's day performances at the National Theater but I can't remember any titles [12](#). The three of us used to go to the cinema in 'Moderen Teatar' [Modern Theater] [13](#)

and in 'Odeon' [14](#), but I can't remember any movie titles.

My parents didn't keep contact with the Jewish community. Apart from the kin, they kept in touch with other Jews from Vidin who lived in Sofia – Itshak Mindal's family, for example, and Josef Perets's family. We didn't keep in touch with the Jews from Iuchbunar [15](#).

Sometimes during the holidays we went to the seaside alone, only the three of us, without friends or relatives. I remember Nessebar, then called Messembria, in 1936. Our departure for the seaside was an event to remember because we used to take a lot of household belongings, a mattress, crockery, everything, because there we would rent lodgings from local people and we had to do the cooking. In the morning, mum would cook and afterwards we would go to the beach with a donkey carrying our luggage, and after the beach we would return to the lodging again. I have a dim memory of the time spent there but I have a photo. We probably took the train to Nessebar, I can't remember, but I keep the suitcase with which we travelled.

I remember the synagogue. I visited it mainly on high holidays like Rosh Hashanah, [Yom] Kippur, Pesach and not so much on Fridays. If we had ever been there on Friday it was when the visit was initiated by granny Dzhamila and grandpa Isak, who came to live in Sofia in 1919.

When some holiday was approaching my parents would buy me a new piece of clothing. After that, dressed in our best clothes, we went to the synagogue. Women went up to the balcony. I was present at my uncle Mois Beniesh's wedding in the synagogue, or midrash maybe, in Odrin street in 1935. Uncle Miko got married when he was very young – only eighteen years old – to Milka, in 1928, a year before I was born. My mother was a witness at uncle Mois's wedding. I remember that she was very elegant, wearing a fox fur borrowed from a friend of hers. I got startled when they broke the glasses during the nuptial ritual. This is the only thing I remember. My mother became very attached to her sister-in-law Rebeka, who was extremely beautiful. The two of them had a very close relationship throughout the years.

On Jewish holidays we convened mainly with uncle Mois and his wife Rebeka. I remember Pesach and Purim. For Purim mum liked to prepare a cake with walnut filling, she shaped the cake into the first letters of the names of my two aunts – Rebeka and Milka and gave it to them, no matter whether we convened with them or not. I don't remember if there was any masking at Purim. Three weeks before Pesach mum would clean the house thoroughly, she washed all the clothes and scrutinized for breadcrumbs.

On holidays we sometimes convened with the family of my good friend, Viska Lazarova, and the mother of another friend and neighbor of mine who lived in the apartment house next door, Eti Rahamimova, used to make wonderful pastel – pasty with beef – and she would invite us.

For Yom Kippur, the house was cleaned, the fasting called taanit, started in the evening. We usually went to grandpa Isak, for a last meal so to say, at about 6 o'clock so that the fasting could start afterwards. It started in the evening and continued throughout the following day and then in the evening, after the visit to the synagogue, we could eat something. During the day we would smell a quince with cloves stuck into it so as not to faint because it was usually hot at [Yom] Kippur even though it was in September.

The first thing we had to put into our mouths after the fasting was bread dipped in oil so that it could easily slide into the organism. After that came the traditional hen with rice. There was a tradition to make kapora [Kapora is an old tradition, which required a rooster to be spun above the man's head and a hen or pullet above the girl's or woman's head, a prayer was read, the idea being to transfer all the sins from the man to the animal after which it should be slaughtered. A new type of kapora nowadays is to give money with the same purpose in the synagogue. It is then distributed among the poor.] for [Yom] Kippur using a white pullet which had been bought in advance and kept in the house for some time. Before taking it to the synagogue to be slaughtered, my grandpa Isak would spin it above my head. The slaughtering of the animal was a torture for me because I usually got attached to the animal while it was at home. Usually it was my mother, who took the chickens to the synagogue, but once she was busy and I was sent to take two chickens to the synagogue. They were in granny's garden. I dropped them because I was afraid and they started running. It was good that a man helped me to catch them. And I took them to the synagogue with grief in my heart. There was a special place for the sacrifice and a special shochet – a person who slaughters the animal in the most painless possible way. After the animal was slaughtered it was left so that the blood could flow out of it because the meat had to be cleansed of it.

My father, of course, didn't keep the strict fast. Sometimes during the day he opened the lid of the pot with the meal for the evening. And he would take a bite. He didn't stick to, I even remember that he liked to take us out of town and exactly on [Yom] Kippur to say, 'Today we are going to...'. Whether it was to Knyazhevo, or somewhere else, I don't remember, but mum was always beginning to worry, 'I won't be ready for the synagogue...'. Nothing to worry about, and he usually took us home when the ritual in the synagogue had already finished. But mum used to keep the fast. And this tradition – to keep [Yom] Kippur and to attend the ritual in the synagogue – continued almost to her death in spite of the severe colitis she suffered from.

I attended a Bulgarian school. Dad had never considered sending me to a Jewish school [16](#). Initially I went to a nursery school and then I started school earlier than the other children – at the age of six and a half. The first grades I attended in 'Naum Simcha' school near 'Simeon' – the building still exists today. There were thirty or forty children in my class, half of them were Jewish. We used to study Christian Religion and we all attended these lessons, I even imitated my Bulgarian classmates and crossed myself. I once asked my mother whether to cross myself or not and she told me 'You are a Jew but you can do it if you want to.'

Although my father had European education and views his dream was to make me bat mitzvah when I become twelve but, unfortunately, he died shortly before that. My mother didn't cook kosher. We used Bulgarian at home. My father was fluent in German, but he refused to use that language with me because he didn't like the Germans, probably because of their fascist excesses as well. On the other hand, when I was in the second grade at school, there came a teacher in Italian who offered us to enrol a course in Italian and my parents didn't object. This is how I learned to talk and write in Italian. We were not obliged to go to church and on the Jewish high holidays we were exempt from school.

Mum helped me with Bulgarian, mainly with the essays because dad asked her to, 'Elvira, help the child...'. And she often replied, 'She must get used to it, on her own!'. So I tried to write my essays alone. With arithmetics, I used to have a lot of difficulties, but later I started doing better. I didn't

like drawing. After finishing primary school I moved to 'Konstantin Fotinov' school [most Bulgarian schools bear the names of Bulgarian activists from the Bulgarian National Revival period or of heroes from the national liberation movement. 'Konstantin Fotinov' school still exists today under the same name.], which was on 'Hristo Botev' street. There were twenty-five or thirty students in my class, half of whom were Jews, because the school was near Iuchbunar – a quarter with a very solid Jewish population.

When I was in primary school I was a member of a Jewish society. It was called 'Akeva'. I don't remember how I had decided to join 'Akeva'; I only remember that it was on the last floor of Bet Am [17](#). At one point, it was run by Rebeka Arsenieva, [Rebeka Arsenieva was a radio director for many years at the radio theater in the Bulgarian National Radio] Ani Mayler's mother. There we used to sing songs, play, dance Israeli, Palestinian, called Jewish dances at the time, we learned the basics of Hebrew, we used to have meetings. Moreover, we had a uniform and an emblem – a piece of cardboard with three stars. This organization was Zionist by nature. We used to talk often about the remote country of our ancestors – Palestine. I was sent to a youth camp in Tserovo through this organization. My memories of the stay there are vague. In June 1942 I finished my primary education with excellent marks, and then we put the badges [yellow stars] [18](#).

I was enrolled at the Third Girls' High School because my mother wanted me to study medicine. Half of my classmates were Jews. There were already Branniks [19](#) in the class. They were easily distinguishable from us because they had grey uniforms and silk stockings. They put on those uniforms when there were demonstrative processions and celebrations. I don't know who had given them that right as it may have been in discrepancy with the school regulations, and we used to wear black uniforms (aprons), badges and thick stockings. We envied them to a certain extent. We, the Jews, even when we wore badges, were not allowed at manifestations and other official, open celebrations. We were not supposed to be shown and seen. Before the first year had ended, before finishing the school term, we had to leave Sofia.

My first good friend was a Jew – Viska Lazarova. We were inseparable from the first grade until the internment. She lived on 32 'Serdika' street. She used to come to my place on 'Makriopolska' street, collected me and we would go to 'Fotinov' school together. I had another friend – Eti Rahamimova, she was my neighbor as well. Our parents were friends, too. I also had Bulgarian friends. We are still close with a classmate from the primary school and we call each other on our birthdays. Her name is Magdalena Stefanova. Her brother, Kolyo, was my bodyguard. And as I was faint-hearted and some of the boys were teasing me, he didn't let them touch me.

Mum wanted me to spend more time at home, not to meet a lot of children so that I wouldn't catch some disease. I used to have some very interesting toys – a sleeping doll Freda, a little gramophone with records, a car that could be wound and made curves, a jumping monkey, the Monopole game. All those were bought from abroad and ordered by my father, probably to friends or colleagues. I can't be sure. I didn't like the dolls so much as a one-legged teddy bear. Usually the children came to me, to my place. Or, if I was ill, and I was ill very often, I put the toys on the windowsill and the children looked at them from the outside. When dad was ill and stayed in bed at home, we would play cards.

My big dream was to learn to ride a bike. Mum's financial situation wasn't very good and hiring a bike cost, with the old money, five leva per quarter of an hour and five leva was the cost of a loaf

of bread, white bread. Mum could only give me five leva per week. And by the time I had taken the bike from the place where I hired it to my street, five minutes had already elapsed. Some of the other children would say, 'Let me ride it for a while! Let me ride it for a while!'. And then I had to return the bike. So this is one of my unfulfilled dreams – to ride a bike.

I could say that until 1940 there weren't anti-Semitic activities. No. My first memory of that dates back to after my father's death. Mum sent me to buy cheese, yellow cheese, from that shop, which was on St. Nikola square. Coming back from the shopping I found myself in 'Maria Luiza' boulevard during the breaking of the window shops – for me personally this was the first manifestation of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria, the year must have been 1942. It was a very scary experience for me. I ran home, I was very young and said, 'Mama, they are breaking the window shops!', and this was my first clash with such manifestations. The second difficult moment was when we were made to wear badges; I was twelve at the time. I still keep the badges. After that I finished the third grade and as usual with excellent marks in everything but my teacher in Bulgarian, Dragneva, who liked me very much, said, 'We can't give you the big award because you are an individual of Jewish origin.' And I was awarded a Bulgarian book – 'Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings' [by Zahari Stoyanov] and a book about the tsar in which it was written – 'Given to Reyna Buko Lidgi for her excellent marks – an individual of Jewish origin.' I still keep that book.

The year was 1941. My father was fired from 'Fayon' tannery. According to the Law for the Protection of the Nation [20](#), the owner Jew couldn't hire clerks who were Jews. [According to the Law for the Protection of the Nation the Jews cannot own land. The Jews cannot take state, municipal or other positions of the public authority and private-legal organizations, cannot practise freelance jobs, trade, industry and crafts.] They told him, it must have been on 19th January 1941, 'You don't have a job from tomorrow.' He exclaimed, 'But I have a family, how will I support them?' And because of the stress my father got an apoplectic stroke. He had problems with the heart, had suffered from severe pneumonia. Before leaving for work that day, the right part of his face paralyzed. It was a real agony the next three weeks. I witnessed it because I was in the same room. During these three weeks my mother and my aunt Rebeka, Mois Beniesh's wife, looked after him. He died on 18th February, in the room where I was sleeping too. It seemed to me that my mother screamed when he died.

The coffin was put on the table in the apartment in 'Makriopolska' street. According to the Jewish religion the dead person should not be dressed, he should be placed in the coffin after being washed and covered in a white sheet. The coffin was then covered and afterwards nobody had the right to look at the dead man. All that was done. It was a rainy day. And they came to take the body. The women, then, didn't have the right to follow the coffin. Only the men went. After he had been buried, my uncles and my aunts returned or Rebeka Beniesh, Mois Beniesh's wife and Milka Beniesh, Miko (Nisim) Beniesh's wife. And my mum and I had to sit on the floor, according to the Jewish ritual, and stay there for seven days. Apart from that, according to the ritual, the underwear is cut because it is nearest to the body and you have to feel the pain from the loss. They dressed me in black, removed the white collar from my black school uniform, they put black socks on my feet. Mum was entirely dressed in black. She went into mourning and even dyed her underwear black because her love was very strong. We didn't change our underwear and didn't take a bath for seven days as the ritual requires. While the sitting takes place, the so-called 'insietti' in Ladino, 'insietti' meaning 'seven days', the bereaved don't have the right to prepare food for themselves.

The food should be brought by relatives and they agree on who will bring food for lunch, who for dinner and they stay together with the bereaved, but they sit on chairs whereas the bereaved sit on the floor. These seven days are quite hard because the relatives ask the bereaved how the person died, what happened and what... and all this makes the situation terribly depressing. For me it was extremely difficult because I loved my father very much. And we had a lot of relatives who were bringing food, but not every day and sometimes mum had to stand up and prepare something for eating from our modest supplies, which had remained after dad's death and so came the seventh day. On the seventh day the women have the right to go and see where the dead man is buried.

Mum remained without any resources because everything we had was mainly from the companies that dad had assisted and they paid him, or, as it turned out later, some of them hadn't paid him anything.

And dad was buried at the lowest possible price, according to mum's words, but I didn't know what exactly that meant. Mum started to look for a job. Robert Kohen's family, who was an acquaintance of uncle Mois Beniesh and owned a haberdashery in 'Pirotska' street, helped her initially. He gave her 2, 000 leva, somebody anonymously bought us coal and wood for the winter, then she got some other aid again, but the situation was terrible because mum was still without work. After dad died a neighbor, Marko Rahamimov, my friend Eti Rahamimova's father, taught her accountancy. She had helped my father while he was still alive but she didn't know accountancy. The knowledge she acquired was of help later.

Soon after dad died, while she was still without work and the situation seemed desperate, she thought of leaving a letter to my uncle Isak. She had a plan – to get up earlier and to jump under the tram because she couldn't see a way out of her awful situation.

I will tell one of her dreams after dad's death, which she told me on waking up and from which, she believed, she got information about the future course of our life. She dreamt that my dad and granny Sarah came near her bed and told her, 'Come with us.' She was in her night gown and while walking on a way she said, 'I can't...'. There were torns. She then saw a bloody trace in front of her, but he told her to continue and they reached the bank of a river. He said, 'We will go to the other side and will throw something for you.' And then she saw a big fish in the air but the fish fell into the water. Granny Sarah shouted from the other side 'Don't worry, we will throw something again.' And they threw a small fish. She woke up. And she woke up later than the possible time at which she could wake to throw herself under the tram. And she told me the dream then. And I smiled and said, 'Well, Mama...', can you imagine to say that, at the age of twelve, 'Mama, this is just wishful thinking.' At that moment, and this is really strange, it is difficult to believe in these things, so at that very moment a neighbor, the wife of Rahamimov – the person who taught her accountancy, came to look for her. She said, 'Elvira, I read that they are looking for electricity collectors.' And mum, using the information from the advertisement, took an exam for electricity collectors in Sofia. The exam was very difficult, but she passed all the exams and they hired her in the electricity company. The situation was complicated, but as the company was international, they could hire her even though she was a Jew. They had that right and then again some strange force helped her. She started going round Sofia and taking down the indications from the electric meters.

One day, an assistant of hers from her previous job saw her and asked her, 'Mrs Lidgi, what are you doing here?', 'Well, I am here at work.'. This work involved going round the streets, to measure and calculate the indications from the electric meters. And this woman went immediately to Mr Kastermans, a director of the electricity company, and said, 'Mr Kastermans, I want to take Mrs Elvira Lidgi in my department, as my employee.' and she actually went there, to a better position in the accountancy department of the electricity company.

And after that, just think about that dream! - one day she met the very director of the insurance company 'Asicurazione Generale', where my mother had worked until I turned four. He asked, 'Mrs Lidgi, why are you in mourning?', because mum was wearing black from head to toes after my father's death. 'Why? What's happened?' 'Well, I remained a widow.' 'Do you have a job?' She told him where she worked, after which he offered her a job - much better and well paid. In this way she changed her job for the third time after my father's death. So she started work there, it must have been in 1941 and stayed there until our internment.

We received a subpoena that we had to leave for Vratsa and, additionally, one of dad's cousins, his uncle Izidor Lidgi's son, who regularly sent us a check to help us, sent us a letter at that moment saying that mum had to do everything possible so that we could leave for Vidin. Mum started preparing, she went to different commissariats and in the end succeeded in obtaining a permission for traveling to Vidin. We were allowed to take anything we wanted but this meant transportation and more money. Mum simply had to sell the furniture and part of our belongings. While mum was trying to get the permission, I had to pack the luggage. We loaded everything up the train. At the station we were seen off by Robert Kohen (who had given us 2, 000 leva) and my favorite teacher in Bulgarian, Nadezhda Dragneva. We had a close relation because I was a good student. She visited us often, she wasn't afraid that we were Jews, my mother and I had also visited her home. She had two sons. We kept in contact even after 1944 and, now, without being afraid, she had come to the station to see us off despite the risk she was taking in that way. Uncle Mois's family was interned to the town of Ferdinand [now Montana], and uncle Miko's - to Sliven. Granny Dzhamila was still in Bulgaria but I don't have information how she survived the Holocaust. She was probably interned to Ruse. My mother's problems after dad's death were so many that obviously granny Dzhamila was in the background.

In Vidin we lived in Izidor Lidgi's big house. It was one of the most impressive houses in Vidin. There was a piano there. My mother and I lived in one room on the floor below, Izidor Lidgi, his wife Liza and their children Marcel and Sofka - in the room next door. His mother, granny Sophie, lived in a separate room. On the floor above lived Buko and Lika Pinkas and their son Bentsion, in the other room - the Zilbermans. In the third room was a friend of the family - Liutinger. All the other Jews lived in much worse conditions in the building of the school in the old part of the town called 'Kaleto'. There the conditions were tough and they were foddered.

There was a curfew and we were allowed to go out only between ten and twelve o'clock in the morning. The rest of the day we used to spend inside. My mother, in her attempt to make up for the food we were given, began cleaning the floor below and the toilet outside regularly. Getting supplies was a major problem. Marko Kohenov sent us parcels from the town of Kula, where he lived because he loved mum very much, as a wife of his favorite cousin, Buko Lidgi. My mother and I ate together with granny Sophie and Izidor Lidgi's family. Granny Sophie would sometimes give us a 100 leva note so that we could have some money.

The time was passing slowly although we talked to each other in the house. Through Bentsion I came into contact with the progressive [leftist] youth – the members of RMS [The Union of Young Workers (UYW)] [21](#). We had meetings with them, took off the badges and sneaked through the gardens in order to meet other Jews from 'Kaleto'. In spite of the hard life, I didn't have a clear idea of what was actually going on. We didn't know about the concentration camps in Europe but there was something in the air... There were rumors that we were going to be sent to Poland, but nobody knew what would happen afterwards. The word Poland was a threatening word...

The other problem was my studying at high school. According to the regulations only two per cent of the Jews in a certain town could attend high school and, of course, the local people had an advantage. My mother couldn't imagine that I wouldn't get proper education and she wrote a letter to the then minister of education, Yotsov, who replied that I should stick to the regulations as a Jew, but I had the right to attend the high school as a private student. We started looking for teachers to prepare me. Mum succeeded in finding the teachers needed and I, in this so complicated situation, started preparing for the exams. [According to the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the admittance of Jews to the schools was limited. Nonetheless, in most of the schools – talking about the middle class Jews – they continue their education in exactly this way – as private students.] We often heard shots and could see the smoke from the Romanian bank opposite because they were bombing Kalafat – they would sound the alarm whenever planes of the English-American union passed over Vidin. On such occasions, we would leave the town and hide in airraid shelters. [On 27th September 1940 the Tripartite pact was officially signed – in fact that was a union between Germany, Italy and Japan. On 1st March 1941 the government led by Bogdan Filov signed a protocol and Bulgaria joined the pact. On 12th December the same year Bulgaria discontinued its diplomatic relations with the USA and Great Britain and declared war on these states. As a reaction to this decision the allies Great Britain and the USA declared war on Bulgaria. The English-American airraids on the Balkans were particularly intensive from September 1943 – on 13th the towns of Stara Zagora, Gorna Oryahovitsa and Kazanlak were bombed, in October – Skopje, Veslets and Nis. In the period between 1st November and 20th December the headquarters of the strategic airraid forces of the USA in Europe formed the 15th Air-borne Army for bombing Bulgaria. In December Sofia and Plovdiv were bombed. At the beginning of 1944 after the second massive airraids on Sofia, the allies attacked the air space over Skopje, Vratsa, Kunino and Beglezh.] I managed to prepare for the exams in May 1944. I sat for all the examinations, passed them and got a certificate that I have finished the fifth grade.

We welcomed 9th September [1944] [22](#) in Vidin. Our boys managed to enter the District Administration and they said that there were found lists according to which the male Jews should have been sent to Poland, whereas the women and children were supposed to be put on barges and sunk into the river. I don't know whether this is true.

Two days before 9th September the fascist authorities sounded the alarm. We were taken out of the town, but I can't say if all the Jews were made to leave it. In this way the German forces quartered in Vidin were given the conditions to leave town unobstructed. The troops withdrew from the town but dug themselves in on some heights near Zaychar – to the west, on Yugoslavian territory. When the Russian troops headed for the border, the Germans started shooting from the high grounds and turned them into bloody meat. They drove the Russians to Vidin like that, in the trucks. On 20th September left the first Bulgarian forces, which were joined by a lot of Jews

volunteers. The first victim was claimed – Zhak Kohen.

We started thinking of returning. Mum left for Sofia first in order to prepare things and there she accidentally met my uncle Mois Beniesh who had been interned to Montana [she means Ferdinand]. She succeeded in finding some lodgings and came back on a train full of Russian soldiers. We packed our luggage and left for Sofia, settled into the lodgings but the conditions were horrible. A friend of mine put us up temporarily at her place. Her name was Florentina Presenti. Meanwhile, mum managed to find a room on 22 ‘Macedonia’ square where we lived for thirty-four years.

My mother started work at the Insurance Company, which after the nationalization, became SIC (State Insurance Company). She retired there. I started the sixth grade in the Fifth Girls’ High School in ‘Tzar Ivan Shishman’ street. At that time uncle Mois starts work at Radio ‘Sofia’. Later, in 1946, he left for Moscow as a spokesman for Georgi Dimitrov, an announcer at Radio ‘Moscow’, and there he enrolled at GITIS (The State Institute for Drama Arts). He graduated in 1950 and came back to Bulgaria with finished theater education and became a drama director at the National Theater. Uncle Miko, on the other hand, immediately after 1944 started some technical job. Auntie Rashel was in Bregovo village. Sarah, Clara, Solomon and their mother Dzhamilia were already in Israel. They left as early as 1941. In 1948 my friend Viska Lazarova, whom I haven’t seen since 1944, left for Israel. I know that she had been interned to Pleven and after 1944 we went to different schools. I was probably sad but the events were tempestuous and the vortex big to leave us any room for such feelings. My other friend, Eti Rahamimova, also left for Israel with the first wave [Mass Aliyah [23](#)]. She became a doctor there. Immediately after uncle Miko’s death his son Isak left for Israel in 1949 and his sister Sarah left in 1951. His brother, Mony, left in 1961 or 1962 and Yakim – in 1966.

The migration of Jews to Israel wasn’t an issue of interest for us because my uncle Mois, who was regarded with great respect by my mother, was a communist and his life was entirely devoted to the building of the new life here in Bulgaria. Moreover, she insisted very much on my studying and at that time I was only in my second year at university.

I have left-wing political convictions and have always believed in the system which saved our lives. After 9th September I became a member of UYW [The Union of Young Workers] while I was still studying at the Fifth Girls’ High School. This union later transformed into Dimitrov’s Communist Youth Union [Bulgarian Komsomol] [24](#). Right after that I was offered a membership in the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) but I refused because I considered myself to be too young for this responsibility. I didn’t manage to become a member of the Party anyway but I was always very active in the organizations of the Fatherland Front [25](#) like my mother who was very active as well. She used to give lectures, took part in gathering aids and membership fees, we organized programs and celebrations.

After finishing my highschool education I decided to take the entrance exams for Sofia University [26](#), I wanted to study Russian Philology despite the fact that this was in contrast with my mother’s expectations. She wanted me to study medicine. I have made my choice because of the memory I have retained of our meeting with the Soviet forces in Vidin during the internment. Something more, some of them stayed in uncle Izidor’s house and their presence was unforgettable for me. I remember that, being a fifteen-year-old girl at the time, I fancied one Russian soldier very much.

He was tall, fair-haired, with blue eyes. His name was Mihail Sarancha. He had luminous eyes and there was this feeling of warmth about him. I remember asking my mom to let him stay for one night in our room in uncle Izidor's house because he didn't have where to sleep. Mum was against it at the beginning but I was begging her so persistently that in the end she gave in. On the next morning we found out that he had brought lice into the room. I was deeply moved by the spirit of selflessness of the Russian soldiers and their will to achieve victory.

During the four years of study and because of my membership in the Youth Union (UYW) I was chosen for a courier of the faculty. I was delivering the correspondence of the Youth Union, and then, you know, of the Komsomol, as we used to call it. I would invariably sit at the first desk and, as we didn't have textbooks, I was taking notes in all subjects. Of course, I liked studying Russian most of all. I was better prepared than the rest of my colleagues because I had practised the language, of course not very correctly, with the Russian soldiers who were in Izidor Lidgi's house, and because I had taken some private lessons when I prepared for the high school exams in Vidin, I also studied French at Sofia University, which I developed and perfected later in language courses.

My last academic year was over in 1950 and we were the first Russian Philology trainees in Bulgaria. After leaving university I had to find a job. And the first job in my life was as a teacher at the school of technology 'ORT' [27](#) - a Jewish school of technology. It used to be opposite the nowadays hospital of the Ministry of the Interior, in the building of the Jewish orphanage. There I taught Russian to all classes. The education in the school was five years. The purpose was to prepare the specialists for the future work in Israel.. There were all kind of specialities with weak currents. Not only Jews studied in it but some Bulgarians as well. ['ORT' leave Bulgaria most probably in 1948 and they open a similar school in Israel. The first teachers were the ones who were teaching in Bulgaria. Until the present day in the office of the international ORT there is a carpet which was made by the students in Sofia. It is one of the best schools in Israel. The organization returned to Bulgaria a few years ago and is now working together with school No134. The official closing of the school took place in 1951. The school took part in two international exhibitions - in Switzerland and Great Britain - with the above-mentioned carpet.] One of my famous students was the singer Sabin Marcov, and professor Mento Monteshev, Aaron Abramovich and others, as well as the Bulgarians Lyubcho Mitsev and Mitko Gulubov. But the fact that I have finished my studies at university didn't mean that I had graduated. For a year I was preparing for my last exams in Russian and Soviet Literature. And in 1951 I graduated, with excellent marks. Then the marking system was based on five grades and I had 5.54. But then the problem with finding a job appeared again. My mother had problems with her kidneys, she had acute pains in her kidneys. I started looking for a job. I was offered a place at the Air Force Headquarters. I took a difficult exam, passed it but I was told that there was a protégé of the general of the headquarter. They told me they were ready to give me references but that they couldn't hire me. The shock was extremely strong. I started wondering what to do, I was twenty-one and applied for a job in 'Himimport' [a state company]. There was such an organization then - 'Himimport'. At the oral interview they asked me whether I had any relatives in Israel. I, of course, didn't have intentions to hide anything. I said, 'Yes, my mother's sisters.' 'Thank you, we will let you know.' And I realized that this was the reason for rejecting my application at 'Himimport'; instead of me they hired a woman from the whiteguards who even lived in my quarter. Then I met accidentally an acquaintance of mine, a colleague so to say. And she asked me 'What are you doing?' 'I'm looking for a job.' 'They are looking for a translator at the Union of the Bulgarian-Soviet Societies, go there.

Tell them I have sent you.'. So I went there, introduced myself, showed them my excellent diploma. They asked me about what I could do and told me they would call me. And surprisingly, one morning, at seven o'clock, the doorbell rang. It was my colleague Todor Minchev with whom we had studied Russian Philology. I didn't know he was working at the union. They asked him about me and told him to invite me to start work. And, on 26th July 1951, I started work as a translator at the Union of Bulgarian-Soviet Societies. I worked in the Cultural Relations Department where we translated current materials on the activities of the Union, apart from that we prepared materials for exhibitions, we carried out contacts with creative unions and once a year we accompanied Soviet delegations that came for the month of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship. When I worked for the Union of Bulgarian-Soviet Societies, I would accompany different delegations from the socialist countries. Once I had to accompany a Polish delegation. I listened to them talking to each other and understood most of the things they said. I decided to attend two-year courses so that I could learn and use the Polish language.

I worked for the Union of Bulgarian-Soviet Societies from 26th July 1951 until 1st September 1955. In August or at the end of July 1955 the then prime minister Vulko Chervenkov [28](#) took the decision to disband the Union of the Bulgarian-Soviet Societies because, in his opinion, the movement had spread throughout Bulgaria and there was no need for a separate organization. And we were left to look for a job, wherever it was.

In August I entered a competition in the Bulgarian State Conservatory. I had found out about the competition from the 'Vecherni Novini' newspaper (Evening News). I decided to enter the competition without any experience with university teaching. The exam was rather complicated, there were twelve other applicants and as I was fluent with the language, came first in that competition and started work on 1st September 1955 as a teacher of Russian in the Conservatory. My work at the Conservatory made me delve into the musical terminology and I have never stopped expanding my knowledge in this sphere.

In 1961 while I was on holiday in Velingrad I met a woman from Spain. Her name was Reyes Bertal. In our conversation I used Ladino and she spoke in Spanish. We understood each other perfectly. I decided to expand my knowledge in Spanish with a language course at Allians. Until 1966 I was only teaching. We had long holidays so I decided to enrol a course for tourist guides. After completing it I decided to offer my services to the Concert Directorate [created in 1948 its name was changed several times. In 1949 its name was changed to Directorate for Musical, Creative and Performing Arts at the Committee for Science, Arts and Culture and in 1960 its name was changed to Bulgarian Concert Directorate. In 1969 it moved under the authority of Main Directorate Bulgarian Music.] as an accompanying interpreter. Because of my job I met a lot of guest-musicians and I traveled with them throughout the country. I became an assistant in most of the big international competitions and festivals like Sofia Musical Weeks, the Ballet Competition, The Competition for Young Opera Singers.

When I turned fifty-five, I was awarded the Golden Badge from the Musical Workers' Union and when I turned seventy-five, I received the Golden Harp – an award from the same union. During my entire almost fifty-year work for the Musical Academy there were two cases that have insulted my Jewish self-awareness.

The first was in 1956 after one of the wars which started in Israel. I went to class... It was a habit of mine to talk to the students about some current event before starting the seminar because I wanted to make them say a few words in Russian about a certain piece of news and one of my students says, 'I have always believed that the Jews are cowards.' And I replied, 'Are you aware that I am a Jew too?' 'Oh, no, I didn't know that.' But they managed to cope with the situation. And the second case was again because they didn't know about my origins.

The second case: a student on another occasion threw in 'But he is chifut [29](#).' You can imagine how I feel when the word 'chifut' is being used as this word is associated with the most difficult years from the Holocaust and I say, 'Do you know what this word means?' 'Well...no.' 'This is the most horrible word for a Jew, and I am Jewish.' 'Oh, I didn't know that.' I informed the Party Secretary. She didn't pay serious attention.

We didn't keep strictly the Jewish traditional holidays. Usually on Pesach and Rosh Hashanah we used to convene in the house of aunt Rebeka and uncle Mois, but we continued to keep [Yom] Kippur – especially my mother, for her it was a law to keep it.

I have never questioned the existence of the state Israel but, on the other hand, I have never thought seriously about that because I knew that our kin were there and I could join them whenever I wanted to. I have never had any administrative problems in this respect. In general, I believe that the state Israel is necessary for our people who had suffered so much. I've been to Israel several times – I visited it in 1960, in 1993 and twice in 1996.

I'll tell you a story – in 1967, for the first time I got the chance to visit my beloved, craved for Soviet Union - as a teacher of Russian for a qualification course. This coincided with the Six-Day-War [30](#), which started on 6th June 1967. I was in Moscow. A severe campaign against Israel started there. There started a TV program in which all the eminent actors, writers, artists were included and they had never even suspected they were Jewish, but there started a campaign against Israel, against the Jews. I called Sofia to ask what was going on, whether I needed to leave for Bulgaria right away. But mum told me 'Don't worry, here in Bulgaria there is nothing wrong.' So I continued my stay in Moscow but there the reaction against Israel was appalling and then Bulgaria discontinued its cultural and its diplomatic relations with Israel [31](#). But we didn't break our correspondence with our relatives and in 1961 my aunt Sarah Beniesh came to Sofia for the first time. We sent her a declaration to testify that she would stay with us but, due to change of circumstances, she was put up at uncle Mois Beniesh's house. From the militia, they came to our home to ask why she wasn't staying with us. Of course, I got a little scared, but I explained to them that my mother was on holiday; I couldn't receive her so she had to go to my uncle's. Everything that happened was closely monitored in that way.

I haven't spent much time thinking about the political life and what was happening around us. I have always been leftist in my political convictions although I've never been a member of BCP, I actively participated in the Fatherland Front movement. My disappointments with the latter communist system appeared after 1989 because I found out a lot of things, which had been kept secret before that. During the coup d'état on 10th November 1989 [32](#), I was accompanying my mother to the polyclinic and while she was being examined I listened to the radio. At the moment when I heard 'Todor Zhivkov is down!' [33](#) I was so amazed that we started saying together with doctors and my mother 'Mama, Todor Zhivkov is down!', which for me was a real... quite of a...,

even a shock you may call it because we were used to his being at the head since 1956. My life after the changes wasn't much different from a financial point of view because with my mother we owned that apartment in Mladost quarter, I went on working at the Academy but as a pensioner. I retired in 1989 but had regular classes even after that. My stress from the changes were of a different nature. I had regular classes, I went to the Academy, the students didn't come, I went back home and started crying because for a person with so many years of experience not to have students... My mother tried to console me, 'Reny, child...'. This is what she called me usually... 'We will live on our two pensions'. My answer was, 'Mama, it's not about the money. I suffer because of that morality, that they associated politics with the language. And one of my best students told me, 'Comrade Lidgi, it's not because of you but because of the language.'

And there started this succession of events. Firstly, the students refused to, they didn't attend the classes in Russian due to the common desire for a new order and new democracy after the coup of 10th November 1989. Secondly, my mother's worsened condition which led to a operation and her death... And I can tell you that I would never forget one day when I was supposed to stay beside my mother's bed and look after her but I had to go to the Conservatory. It was right after 10th November 1989. At that time the desire for a new order and freedom led to all kind of situations, especially among the young people. I had to take something from my cabinet in the Conservatory. A group of students met me at the door, 'Where are you going?'. I said, 'I need to take something from my cabinet, something...' 'You can't do that, you don't have the right.' I said, 'Who is in charge of you?' 'We have a commandant but he went to a happening.' I said 'Will anyone of you accompany me upstairs because I need to take something from it.' It was a shock for me because the students turned against their teachers.

I started participating in activities in the Jewish organization at some time in the spring of 1990. Stella Iel, who chaired WIZO [34](#), invited me to the Jewish organization. I first became a member of WIZO, the women's organization, and after that I was drawn into the town union. I started to contribute regularly to 'Evreiski Vesti' (Jewish News) [This is the only Jewish newspaper in Bulgaria which has existed for seventy years.] And when my mother died it seems to me that this organization gave me moral stability, the stability to know I have where to communicate because my mother's death was a great stress to me. There was another fateful event. On 7th November 2000 I survived a car accident. I woke up in Pirogov Hospital. Later it turned out that I had a concussion, my two legs were broken and my pelvis was cracked. My body was a ruin to put it in a few words. My friends from club 'Health' at the Jewish Center [Bet Am] immediately took matters in hand. Sofka Danon and Morits Assa asked from the administration and Robert Dzherasi that, after being discharged from hospital, I should be put up for some time at the Home of the Parent, until I recover. The rehabilitation, the people who looked after me so much, helped me recover to a much bigger degree. In fact, my comparatively quick recovery was due to my physical preparation at club 'Health' before that because I acquired the things shown to me by the rehabilitator very quickly. It seems to me that I wouldn't have recovered at all if it wasn't for the Home of the Parent. Even now I am a member of Club 'Health'. Sometimes I show the exercises. I go there every Monday and Wednesday. Every Tuesday afternoon I go to club 'Ladino'. Every Thursday I go to a philharmonic concert – I have a subscription. Every Saturday afternoon I am in the 'Golden Age' club. On Sunday my friend David Kohen and I usually take a walk to Pancharevo. Once a week I find the time to visit my aunt Rebeka. I keep in touch with Sarah Meyuhas's family in Israel. We talk on the phone. I am in a correspondence with a first cousin of my friend Viska Lazarova – Violeta

Mendel. I also write to Florentina Presenti who lives in Canada. I have an active life. And I am very happy to have joined the Jewish organization.

Translated by Dimka Stoeva

Glossary

1 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The Sephardi population of the Balkans originates from the Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula, as a result of the 'Reconquista' in the late 15th century (Spain 1492, and Portugal 1495). The majority of the Sephardim subsequently settled in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, mainly in maritime cities (Salonika, Istanbul, Smyrna, etc.) and also in the ones situated on significant overland trading routes to Central Europe (Bitola, Skopje, and Sarajevo) and to the Danube (Adrianople, Philipopolis, Sofia, and Vidin).

2 Sephardi Jewry

Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Their ancestors settled down in North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, South America, Italy and the Netherlands after they had been driven out from the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 15th century. About 250,000 Jews left Spain and Portugal on this occasion. A distant group among Sephardi refugees were the Crypto-Jews (Marranos), who converted to Christianity under the pressure of the Inquisition but at the first occasion reassumed their Jewish identity. Sephardi preserved their community identity; they speak Ladino language in their communities up until today. The Jewish nation is formed by two main groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi group which differ in habits, liturgy their relation toward Kabala, pronunciation as well in their philosophy.

3 Ladino

also known as Judeo-Spanish, it is the spoken and written Hispanic language of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. Ladino did not become a specifically Jewish language until after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (and Portugal in 1495) - it was merely the language of their province. It is also known as Judezmo, Dzhudezmo, or Spaniolit. When the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal they were cut off from the further development of the language, but they continued to speak it in the communities and countries to which they emigrated. Ladino therefore reflects the grammar and vocabulary of 15th century Spanish. In Amsterdam, England and Italy, those Jews who continued to speak 'Ladino' were in constant contact with Spain and therefore they basically continued to speak the Castilian Spanish of the time. Ladino was nowhere near as diverse as the various forms of Yiddish, but there were still two different dialects, which corresponded to the different origins of the speakers: 'Oriental' Ladino was spoken in Turkey and Rhodes and reflected Castilian Spanish, whereas 'Western' Ladino was spoken in Greece, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia and Romania, and preserved the characteristics of northern Spanish and Portuguese. The vocabulary of Ladino includes hundreds of archaic Spanish words, and also includes many words from different languages: mainly from Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, French, and to a lesser extent from Italian. In the Ladino spoken in Israel, several words have been borrowed from Yiddish. For most of its lifetime, Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitro. It was only in the

late 19th century that Ladino was ever written using the Latin alphabet. At various times Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States and Latin America.

4 Shalom Organization

Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria. It is an umbrella organization uniting 8,000 Jews in Bulgaria and has 19 regional branches. Shalom supports all forms of Jewish activities in the country and organizes various programs.

5 Dimitrov, Georgi (1882-1949)

A Bulgarian revolutionary, who was the head of the Comintern from 1936 through its dissolution in 1943, secretary general of the Bulgarian Communist Party from 1945 to 1949, and prime minister of Bulgaria from 1946 to 1949. He rose to international fame as the principal defendant in the Leipzig Fire Trial in 1933. Dimitrov put up such a consummate defense that the judicial authorities had to release him.

6 September Rebellion in 1923

a rebellion that started in 1923, organized and led by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), together with the leftist forces of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, with the aim of taking down the government of the right-leaning Alexander Tsankov, which was in office after the coup d'état of 9th June 1923. Leaders of the rebellion were Vassil Kolarov, Georgi Dimitrov and Gavril Genov. The rebellion started first in the town of Muglitzh, in the region of the towns of Stara Zagora and Nova Zagora. The beginning of the rebellion was declared during the night of 23rd September in the town of Ferdinand (now Montana). In the next days it spread on the whole territory of Northwestern Bulgaria. Sofia and other big cities did not take part in the rebellion. The shortage of weapons turned out to be fatal and in the end of September the rebellion was over without having achieved any success. Georgi Dimitrov and Vassil Kolarov immigrated to Yugoslavia, followed by hundreds of other participants in the rebellion. Some of the ones who remained were killed, others – put in jail. At the beginning of 1924 the Parliament passed the Law for the Protection of the State by the force of which BCP was officially banned.

7 Internment of Jews in Bulgaria

Although Jews living in Bulgaria were not deported to concentration camps abroad or to death camps, many were interned to different locations within Bulgaria. In accordance with the Law for the Protection of the Nation, the comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation initiated after the outbreak of WWII, males were sent to forced labor battalions in different locations of the country, and had to engage in hard work. There were plans to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi Death Camps, but these plans were not realized. Preparations had been made at certain points along the Danube, such as at Somovit and Lom. In fact, in 1943 the port at Lom was used to deport Jews from Aegean Thrace and from Macedonia, but in the end, the Jews from Bulgaria proper were spared.

8 Utro

Meaning Morning, it was a Bulgarian bourgeois daily, issued between 1911 and 1914. It was founded by St. Damyanov and the first editor-in-chief was St. Tanev. Utro published sensational both local and international news, supporting the policy of the Government, especially during the World War II, as well as Bulgaria's pro-German orientation. Its circulation amounted to 160,000 copies.

9 Zora

Meaning Dawn, it was a Bulgarian daily published between 1919 and 1944. It was owned by 'Balgarski Pechat' (Bulgarian Printing) publishing house and its editor-in-chief was Danail Krapchev. Zora was primarily affiliated to the rightist Bulgarian Democratic Party, but later it took a more neutral position and fought for national union. It defended the interests of the occupied Bulgarians from Thrace, Macedonia, Dobrudzha and the Western Outlying Districts. It published political, economic, and cultural information. After 9th September 1944, it stopped being published. Its editor-in-chief was convicted and executed.

10 Bolsheviks

Members of the movement led by Lenin. The name 'Bolshevik' was coined in 1903 and denoted the group that emerged in elections to the key bodies in the Social Democratic Party (SDPRR) considering itself in the majority (Rus. bolshynstvo) within the party. It dubbed its opponents the minority (Rus. menshynstvo, the Mensheviks). Until 1906 the two groups formed one party. The Bolsheviks first gained popularity and support in society during the 1905-07 Revolution. During the February Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks were initially in the opposition to the Menshevik and SR ('Sotsialrevolyutsionery', Socialist Revolutionaries) delegates who controlled the Soviets (councils). When Lenin returned from emigration (16 April) they proclaimed his program of action (the April theses) and under the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' began to Bolshevikize the Soviets and prepare for a proletariat revolution. Agitation proceeded on a vast scale, especially in the army. The Bolsheviks set about creating their own armed forces, the Red Guard. Having overthrown the Provisional Government, they created a government with the support of the II Congress of Soviets (the October Revolution), to which they admitted some left-wing SRs in order to gain the support of the peasantry. In 1952 the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

11 The dynasty of the czar Ferdinand I Saxe Coburg Gota

tzar Ferdinand I Saxe Coburg Gota (26th February 1861 – 10th September 1948 – a German prince, royal prince (1908–1918) and czar (1908–1918) of Bulgaria. Born in Vienna, son of the Austrian royal prince Avgusty and the daughter of the French king Luis Philipe – Clementina. Marries Maria-Luiza Bourbon – Parmaska. They have four children – royal prince Boris Turnovski, royal prince Kiril Preslavski and the royal princesses Evdokia and Nadezhda. After the death of Maria-Luiza Ferdinand married for the second time to princess Eleonora but did not have children from this marriage. After Ferdinand's abdication in 1918 Boris III Turnovski sat on the Bulgarian throne. In 1930 he married an Italian princess, the daughter of king Victor Emanuel, Giovanna Savoyska. They had two children – Maria-Luiza (1934) and Simeon (1937).

12 'Ivan Vazov' Bulgarian National Theater

In 1892 the People's Drama Group 'Sulza I Smyah' [Tear and Laughter] was created and it was sponsored by the state. In 1904 its name was changed to Bulgarian National Theater under the authority of the Ministry of the People's Education. In 1908 the Bulgarian Opera Society was created, which in 1921 moved under the authority of the National Theater. Since then the theater has had two departments – drama and opera. In 1928–1929 a Children's Ballet and Drama School opened at the theatre, and in 1942 a theatrical school was created. The building of the National Theater was constructed in 1906 but was officially opened in 1907.

13 'Moderen Teatar' [Modern Theater]

the biggest cinema hall on the Balkan Peninsula, opened on 4th December 1908. This, as a matter of fact, was the second cinema in Europe. It is situated in the center of Sofia, on Maria Luiza boulevard between Luvov most (Lion Bridge) and Halite (the central market place). It still exists today.

14 'Odeon'

a joint-stock company which dealt with the distribution and production of movies in Bulgaria. It had its own cinema hall in the 1920s. One of the first assaults was done there during a talk by Russian emigrants who came to Bulgaria in 1919. Apart from the cinema theaters there existed mobile cinematographs at that time.

15 Iuchbunar

The poorest residential district in Sofia; the word is of Turkish origin and means 'the three wells'.

16 Jewish schools in Sofia

In the 19th century gradually the obligatory religious education was replaced with a secular one, which around 1870 in Bulgaria was linked to the organization Alliance Israelite Universelle. The organization was founded by the distinguished French statesman Adolphe Crémieux with the goal of popularizing French language and culture among Jews in the Ottoman Empire (of which Bulgaria was also part until 1878). From 1870 until 1900 Alliance Israelite played a positive role in the process of founding Jewish schools in Bulgaria. According to the bulletin of the organization, statistics about Jewish schools showed the date of the foundation of every Jewish school and its town. Two Jewish schools were founded in Sofia by the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1887 and 1896. The first one was almost in the center of Sofia between the streets Kaloyan, Lege and Alabin, and in the urban development plan it was noted down as a 'Jewish school.' The second one, opened in the Sofia residential estate Iuchbunar, had the unofficial name 'Iuchbunar Jewish school.' The synagogue in that estate was called the same way. School affairs were run by the Jewish school boards (Komite Skoler), which were separated from the Jewish municipalities and consisted of Bulgarian citizens, selected by all the Jews by an anonymous vote. The documents on the Jewish municipalities preserved from the beginning of the 20th century emphasize that the school boards were separated from the synagogue ones. A retrospective look at the activity of the Jewish

municipalities in Bulgaria at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century indicates only that the education of all Jewish boys had to be obligatory and that there was a school at every synagogue. In 1891 the Bulgarian Parliament passed a law on education, according to which all Bulgarian citizens, regardless of religious groups were supposed to receive their education in Bulgarian. The previously existing French language Alliance Israelite Universelle schools were not closed, yet their activities were regulated and they were forced to incorporate the teaching of Bulgarian into their schedule. Currently the only Jewish school in Bulgaria is 134th school 'Dimcho Debelyanov' in Sofia. It has the statute of a high school since 2003. It is supported by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and AJJDC. It is among the elite schools in Bulgaria and its students learning Hebrew are both Jews and Bulgarians.

17 Bet Am

The Jewish center in Sofia today, housing all Jewish organizations.

18 Yellow star in Bulgaria

According to a governmental decree all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear distinctive yellow stars after 24th September 1942. Contrary to the German-occupied countries the stars in Bulgaria were made of yellow plastic or textile and were also smaller. Volunteers in previous wars, the war-disabled, orphans and widows of victims of wars, and those awarded the military cross were given the privilege to wear the star in the form of a button. Jews who converted to Christianity and their families were totally exempt. The discriminatory measures and persecutions ended with the cancellation of the Law for the Protection of the Nation on 17th August 1944.

19 Brannik

Pro-fascist youth organization. It started functioning after the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1941 and the Bulgarian government forged its pro-German policy. The Branniks regularly maltreated Jews.

20 Law for the Protection of the Nation

A comprehensive anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria was introduced after the outbreak of World War II. The 'Law for the Protection of the Nation' was officially promulgated in January 1941. According to this law, Jews did not have the right to own shops and factories. Jews had to wear the distinctive yellow star; Jewish houses had to display a special sign identifying it as being Jewish; Jews were dismissed from all posts in schools and universities. The internment of Jews in certain designated towns was legalized and all Jews were expelled from Sofia in 1943. Jews were only allowed to go out into the streets for one or two hours a day. They were prohibited from using the main streets, from entering certain business establishments, and from attending places of entertainment. Their radios, automobiles, bicycles and other valuables were confiscated. From 1941 on Jewish males were sent to forced labor battalions and ordered to do extremely hard work in mountains, forests and road construction. In the Bulgarian-occupied Yugoslav (Macedonia) and Greek (Aegean Thrace) territories the Bulgarian army and administration introduced extreme measures. The Jews from these areas were deported to concentration camps, while the plans for the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria proper were halted by a protest movement launched by the vice-chairman of the

Bulgarian Parliament.

21 UYW

The Union of Young Workers (also called Revolutionary Youth Union). A communist youth organization, which was legally established in 1928 as a sub-organization of the Bulgarian Communist Youth Union (BCYU). After the coup d'état in 1934, when parties in Bulgaria were banned, it went underground and became the strongest wing of the BCYU. Some 70% of the partisans in Bulgaria were members of it. In 1947 it was renamed Dimitrov's Communist Youth Union, after Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time.

22 9th September 1944

The day of the communist takeover in Bulgaria. In September 1944 the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria. On 9th September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a broad left-wing coalition, deposed the government. Although the communists were in the minority in the Fatherland Front, they were the driving force in forming the coalition, and their position was strengthened by the presence of the Red Army in Bulgaria.

23 Mass Aliyah

Between September 1944 and October 1948, 7,000 Bulgarian Jews left for Palestine. The exodus was due to deep-rooted Zionist sentiments, relative alienation from Bulgarian intellectual and political life, and depressed economic conditions. Bulgarian policies toward national minorities were also a factor that motivated emigration. In the late 1940s Bulgaria was anxious to rid itself of national minority groups, such as Armenians and Turks, and thus make its population more homogeneous. More people were allowed to depart in the winter of 1948 and the spring of 1949. The mass exodus continued between 1949 and 1951: 44,267 Jews immigrated to Israel until only a few thousand Jews remained in the country.

24 Bulgarian Komsomol

The communist youth organization in Bulgaria in socialist times. The task of the Komsomol was to spread the ideas of communism among worker and peasant youth. The Komsomol also aimed at providing a communist upbringing by involving the youth worker in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education.

25 Fatherland Front

A broad left wing umbrella organization, created in 1942, with the purpose to lead the Communist Party to power.

26 St

Kliment Ohridski University: The St. Kliment Ohridski university in Sofia was the first school of higher education in Bulgaria. It was founded on 1st October 1888 and this date is considered the birthday of Bulgarian university education. The school is named after St. Kliment, who was a student of Cyril and Methodius, to whom we owe the existence of the Cyrillic alphabet. Kliment and

his associate Naum founded several public schools in Ohrid and Preslav in the late 9th century with the full support of King Boris I.

27 Organisation for the Distribution of Artisanal and Agricultural Skills among the Jews in Russia ORT

On 22nd March 1880, by order of the Minister of Interior Affairs of Russia, the Organisation for the Distribution of Artisanal and Agricultural Skills among the Jews in Russia ORT was established. A small group of prominent Russian Jews petitioned Tzar Alexander II for permission to start a fund to help lift Russia's five million Jews out of crushing poverty. ORT, Obschestvo Remeslenovo i zemledelcheskovo Trouda (the Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour) was founded. ORT today provides skills-training and self-help projects for some of the world's most impoverished communities, using funds raised by its supporters, and added to by development agencies and national governments, to put people on the path to economic independence.

28 Chervenkov, Vulko Velyov (6th September 1900 - 21st October 1980)

A political and state figure, a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). He took part in the preparation of the September Rebellion in 1923. In 1925 he emigrated to the USSR and graduated from the International Lenin School in Moscow. He was a teacher from 1928 and later became head of the Bulgarian section and a director of the Communist University for the national minority groups from the West. After 9th September 1944 he came back to Bulgaria and became a member of Politbureau and a secretary of the Central Committee of BCP. He was a chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1950 until 1956, deputy-chairman from 1956 until 1961 and Minister of the education and culture from January till June 1958. at the end of 1961 he was no longer a member of Politbureau. He was dismissed from the post deputy-chairman of the Council of Ministers. Later he was expelled from BCP. Rehabilitated in 1969.

29 Chifuti

Derogatory nickname for Jews in Bulgarian.

30 Six-Day-War

The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

31 Severing the diplomatic ties between the Eastern Block and Israel

After the 1967 Six-Day-War, the Soviet Union cut all diplomatic ties with Israel, under the pretext of Israel being the aggressor and the neighboring Arab states the victims of Israeli imperialism. The Soviet-occupied Eastern European countries (Eastern Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary

and Bulgaria) conformed to the verdict of the Kremlin and followed the Soviet example. Diplomatic relations between Israel and the ex-Communist countries resumed after the fall of communism.

32 10th November 1989

After 35 years of rule, Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov was replaced by the hitherto Prime Minister Peter Mladenov who changed the Bulgarian Communist Party's name to Socialist Party. On 17th November 1989 Mladenov became head of state, as successor of Zhivkov. Massive opposition demonstrations in Sofia with hundreds of thousands of participants calling for democratic reforms followed from 18th November to December 1989. On 7th December the 'Union of Democratic Forces' (SDS) was formed consisting of different political organizations and groups.

33 Zhivkov, Todor (1911-1998)

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (1954-1989) and the leader of Bulgaria (1971-1989). His 35 years as Bulgaria's ruler made him the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-block nations of Eastern Europe. When communist governments across Eastern Europe began to collapse in 1989, the aged Zhivkov resigned from all his posts. He was placed under arrest in January 1990. Zhivkov was convicted of embezzlement in 1992 and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. He was allowed to serve his sentence under house arrest.

34 WIZO

Women's International Zionist Organisation; a hundred year old organization with humanitarian purposes aiming at supporting Jewish women all over the world in the field of education, economics, science and culture. The history of WIZO in Bulgaria started in 1923. Its founder was the wife of the rabbi of Sofia, Riha Priar. After more than 40 years of break during communism WIZO restored its activities in 1991 with headquarters in Sofia and branches in the countryside. From that moment on it organises a variety of cultural and social activities and cooperates with other democratic women's organisations in the country. Currently the chairwoman of WIZO in Bulgaria is Ms. Alice Levi.